

Five Thousand Midsummer Days

The Caburn, its people and wildlife



working today
for nature tomorrow

Paragliding from Caburn

Malcolm Emery
(English Nature)



Malcolm Emery (English Nature)



Adonis blue butterfly

Alan Holden



Chalkhill blue butterfly

Alan Holden



Marbled white butterfly

Alan Bowley (English Nature)



Burnt orchid

Alan Bowley (English Nature)



Conservation volunteers take a break from clearing scrub



The Caburn in 1934

Windows in time

Introduction

This is the story of the Caburn, an ancient hill fort on the Sussex Downs overlooking the Ouse valley. The Caburn is part of Mount Caburn National Nature Reserve, in the Lewes Downs Special Area of Conservation – an internationally important oasis for wildlife, with a very long history of human settlement. The story is told as a series of six 'windows in time', falling on midsummer days throughout the history of the site and its people, from 3,000 BC to the present day.

Archaeologists have worked on Caburn for more than 120 years. Paleobotanists have examined plant fragments and pollen, preserved in the sediments of the region, to find out what vegetation covered the land over past millennia. Archaeologists can trace events and find objects, but rarely can these be linked to the people who actually dug the ditches and pits seen on Caburn today or used the pots or tools now found in Lewes Museum. We have therefore sought to 're-create' some of the people who lived here; Aethewulf and Gwynelle among others. Traces of their very existence may now only be faintly etched on the landscape, but nonetheless, their everyday cares and concerns about making a living, or looking after their families were not so very different from our own. Through their eyes, we can look through windows in time to see something of the changing cultures, landscapes and wildlife of the Caburn and its surrounds.

Malcolm Emery (English Nature)



The Caburn in 1993



Neolithic / 3000 BC

Setting the scene

Evidence from snail shells in the soils of the South Downs suggests a wooded environment prior to 4000 BC. The ancestors of the Neolithic people, nomadic by nature, had migrated from Europe over 3,000 years earlier, before the land bridge over which they had walked, was swamped by rising sea levels to form what we now know as the English Channel.

It was late afternoon, and Gwynelle felt as if she had been walking all day. In the morning she and her sister had left offerings at the great ditched enclosure on Offham Hill. Sometimes the dead were laid there for the crows to pick clean, but today the enclosure was 'empty', and they had placed a round-based pottery bowl and a flint arrowhead in one of the ditches as gifts to the ancestors. Then they had returned home, following hunters' paths along the river valley to the foot of Caburn. Their mother and aunt were harvesting grain there, and they would have to help carry the harvest home for threshing. Gwynelle recognized the hill by its distinctive shape. In summer, except for the round summit, this was disguised by a clothing of trees. In winter, when most of the trees lost their leaves, the hill's magical shape could be seen more clearly. From a distance she recognised the

different types of trees on the hill by their colours. At base of the hill were alders, which had slightly darker coloured leaves than the light green of the limes on the lower slopes. Above, the lime trees were mixed with shrubs and the colour was more broken. It was amongst the limes that her great-grandfather had first cut down trees to make small clearings. Each year they made a few more but abandoned others. Some of the clearings provided grazing for their cattle and pigs, and some were used to plant cereals. Her father cut down the trees using a halfted, polished flint axe head, made at the mines at Windover Hill. He also cut young lime branches for leaf fodder for the animals. In Gwynelle's opinion, the cereals were the most work because she regularly had to stay near the crop all day when it was growing and ripening, to keep the animals and birds away. It was an important job because when winter came they would have a store of grain that would be ground into flour, using greensand grinding stones brought by hunters from further inland. Her mother made flour every day for their porridge and flat bread. Today, Gwynelle noticed more than before that there were now quite dark patches on the hill. Pockets of yew trees were becoming established in the lime woodland, probably because they did not bring the animals here as much as in her grandfather's time. Her father said that the Caburn was a special hill. It was too steep to be tamed, and was best left wild – for hunting and for the Gods.

A wilderness of lime forest, glades. Jays flying in foreground

In southern Britain, the 'Neolithic' is associated with the first evidence of farming, communal monuments (causewayed enclosures, long barrows, and flint mines) the first pottery and polished stone tools. In

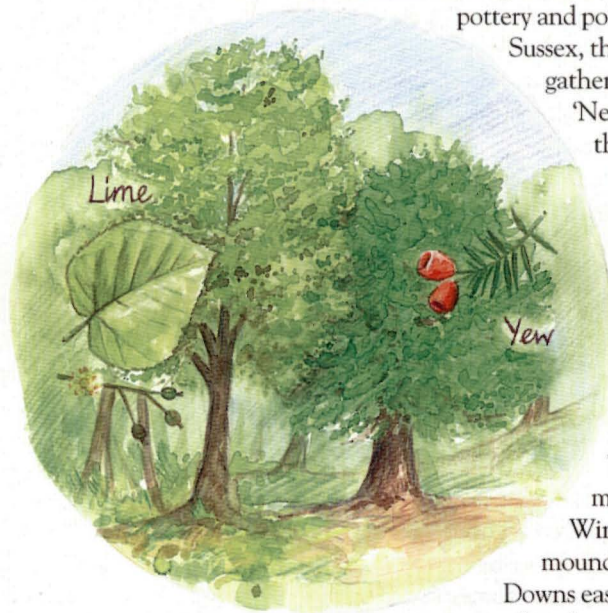
Sussex, the Mesolithic hunters and gatherers probably adopted the 'Neolithic ideas', rather than the ways being introduced by influxes of new people.

The exact function of causewayed enclosures is unknown, but they were clearly communal efforts, of which the Offham enclosure, west of Caburn across the Ouse valley, is the nearest.

There is a small cluster of mines east of Caburn, on Windover Hill. Long burial mounds are most prevalent on the Downs east of the Caburn. However, most of our knowledge of Caburn itself at

this time, comes from the vegetation record. An exceptional pollen record has been obtained from peat at the southern base of the Caburn. It provides a precise record of vegetation change on the Caburn chalkland from the Mesolithic to the Early Bronze Age (5150–1850 BC). It is only from the Neolithic (c. 4450 BC), that human interference with Caburn's vegetation is evident. High peaks in lime pollen suggest the coppicing, pollarding, or the shredding of lime, possibly for animal fodder. These early 'farmers' incorporated growing crops and keeping domestic animals such as cattle, pigs, sheep and goats with hunting and gathering.

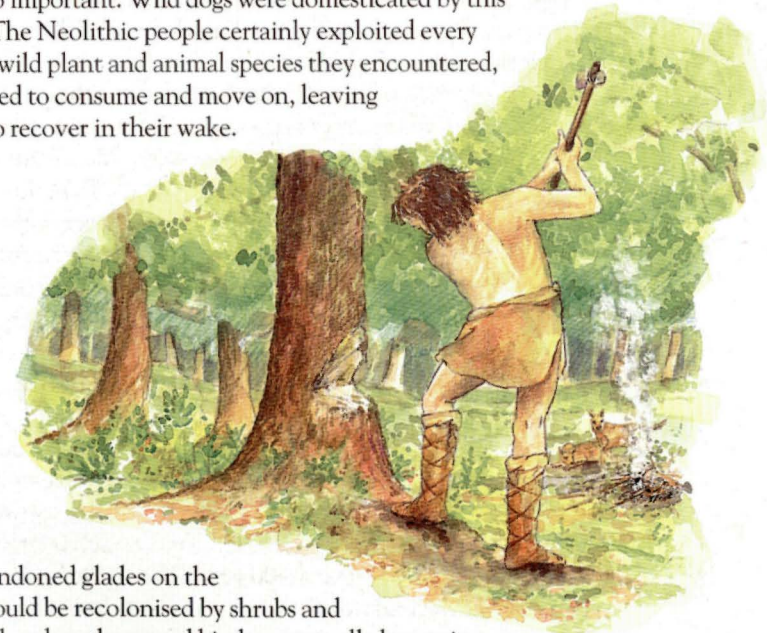
By c. 3850 BC cereal grains are present in Caburn's pollen record, suggesting small plantings in woodland clearings on its lower slopes. From c. 3450 BC there is woodland regeneration and the establishment of yew woodland, which is largely maintained for the next 1,400 years. The single broken leaf-shaped arrowhead from the excavations at the summit is the only certain Neolithic artefact from Caburn, and suggests that the site was increasingly left to the occasional hunter, and was certainly not settled.



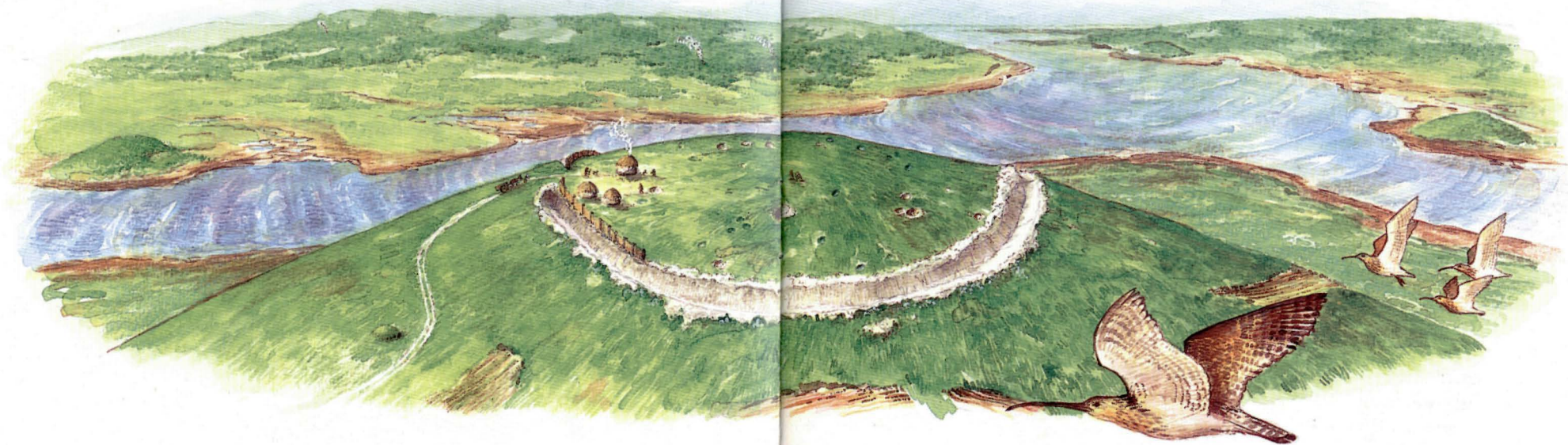
Leaves of lime and yew

Neolithic people were developing a 'slash and burn' type of agriculture, creating and using small woodland clearings. Flint was mined from the chalk, and this, along with wood, bone and antler was used to make tools and weapons. Their diet would have included a broad range of cereal, meat, fruit, roots and berries. The low population density meant that transmittable disease was less of a threat than it would be for later generations living in larger, denser settlements. Even so, their average life expectancy has been estimated at only 27 years.

These farmers continued to hunt and fish. They must have known a great deal about wildlife, including the seasonal nature of growth and reproduction of plants and animals. Among the wild plants which were probably eaten were white goosefoot, black bindweed, pale persicaria and corn spurrey. They would have also collected wild herbs for medicinal purposes. Hunted animals included wild ox, red deer, roe deer, wild pigs, beaver, fox, fish, and birds. Shellfish, and birds' eggs were also important. Wild dogs were domesticated by this period. The Neolithic people certainly exploited every possible wild plant and animal species they encountered, but tended to consume and move on, leaving nature to recover in their wake.



The abandoned glades on the chalk would be recolonised by shrubs and trees such as hawthorn and birch, eventually becoming woodland again, except where animals kept them open with their grazing and browsing.



Middle Iron Age /
400 BC

Setting the scene

Clearance is visible in the landscape, as cultivated fields. Smoke rises from other settlements across the valley. Marshes with alder and willow woodlands still cover most of the estuarine fringes. In the middle distance, people are visible on the hill returning from the fields with a horse drawn cart.

Bodisa had been helping her father with the harvest, on the ridge to the north of Caburn. Now she walked back to Caburn, past the round burial mounds of her ancestors. There had been such a fuss about building the bank and ditch enclosure around the hill. After all, where exactly is the boundary of a sacred hill? The bank was not very big, but together with its v-shaped ditch in front, the top of the hill rose majestically out of this encircling white chalk ring. These new works looked at their best from the marshes and salt flats below the south side. She often fished down there, watching the curlews and ducks.

Only a small group of people actually lived on Caburn, its guardians. Most of the 'Caburn people' settled in the scattered farmsteads in the surrounding area. The Caburn was their focal place for community stores, and important for gatherings on feast and ceremonial occasions.

For numerous days Bodisa had been going there every afternoon to weave cloth with her aunt. The upright loom had heavy triangular chalk weights to keep the vertical threads taut. The fabric was strong and coarse, and was made from sheep's wool, which they had spun all through the dark winter evenings. She worked at the weaving until her father arrived with his cart, loaded with harvest for Caburn's stores. Bodisa noticed that new store pits had been dug because the old ones were mouldy. Soon there would be a ceremony to close the old ones and bury gifts to the Gods. The guardians needed special offerings to bury in these pits; her father had once given them a sword. These customs were traditions of the hill's community, which had settled as far as her eyes could see – standing on top of the Caburn.

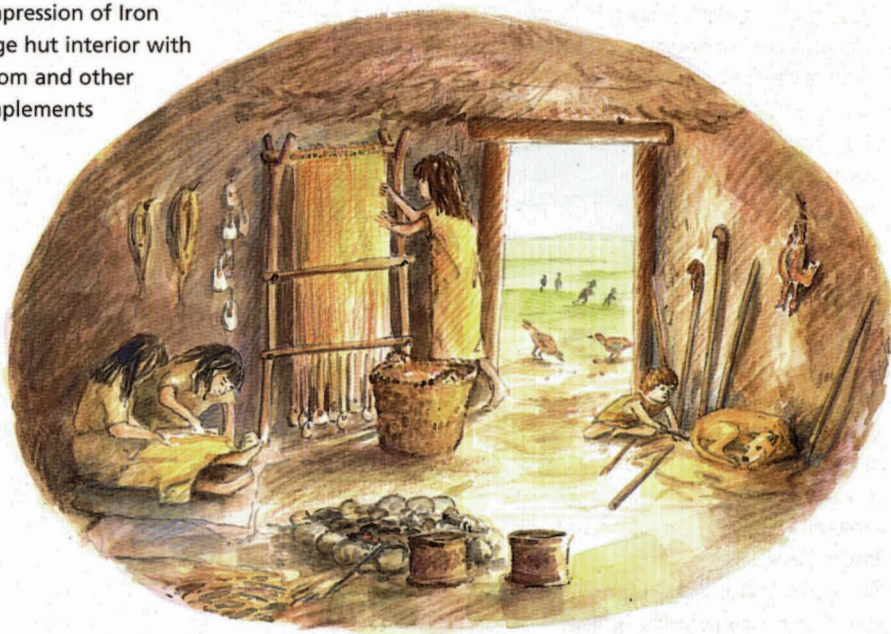
The Caburn is traditionally described as an Iron Age hillfort. Its first rampart (the inner rampart) dates to the Middle Iron Age (c. 400 BC) and encloses 1.9 hectares. Cissbury, the Trundle and Torberry are the other South Downs hillforts contemporary with the Caburn. Excavated evidence of house structures from these hillfort interiors is lacking, although farmsteads with roundhouses are quite common in the wider landscape.

Settlement in the
landscape extends to
the construction of
sacred monuments.
Curlews flying in
foreground

**Middle Iron Age /
400 BC**

Caburn's inner rampart was made of chalk rubble. A wooden fence surmounted part, but not all, of its circuit. Although now eroded (less than half a metre high), the rampart was never very substantial. Its effect was gained by accentuating the hill's natural slope. A v-shaped ditch on the down slope side (originally 8 m wide at its top and 2.7m deep) increased the illusion of height. The Middle Iron Age rampart was preceded by a post-built enclosure of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age. Within this were the possible remains of two post built roundhouses, together with rubbish heaps of decorated fine ware pottery. Although evidence of Middle Iron Age houses has not been found, there are the remains of more than 140 pits of this date within Caburn's interior. These were relatively small, just 93 cm deep and 14cm in diameter. Perhaps their first use was for food/grain storage, but the lack of erosion on their sides indicates that they did not stay open for long, once they went out of use. Instead they were back-filled with soil, rubble and both whole and broken artefacts. The artefacts have a patterning, which suggests that that they were specially selected, and not just domestic rubbish. Finds in the bottoms of the pits include iron weapons and knives or razors, weaving combs, loom weights, sheep skulls, and a few human remains. Additional, potentially symbolic deposits,

**Impression of Iron
Age hut interior with
loom and other
implements**



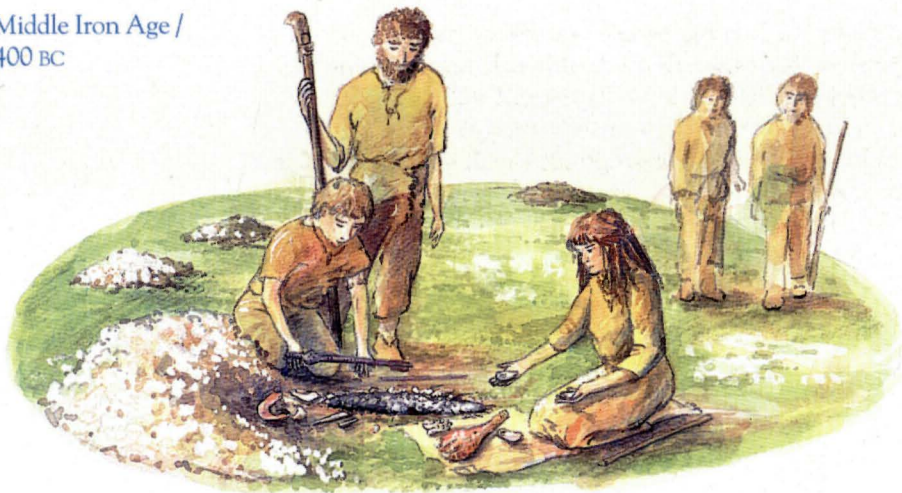
Within the enclosure on the hilltop, some 140 small pits have been found. Here, in 1996, Pit B is being excavated (left). Amongst other things it contained a potin coin (below), made of high-tin bronze, and dating to around 100BC – part, it is thought, of a carefully selected and arranged ritual deposit.

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include horse and dog bones, wild boar tusks, bones of raven, duck, curlew and fowl, and potin (tin-bronze) coins. There are also deliberately damaged tools and weapons, for example, an iron point jammed into an iron billhook and placed on a pile of wood shavings, and a broken sword placed on a pile of wooden sticks. The pits with the most ritually charged finds such as human remains and damaged weapons, are situated on the most elevated parts of the hill.

It is therefore possible that the main purpose of the Caburn was not for settlement, but as a location for the special deposition of objects. Caburn's pit deposits may be part of a general Iron Age custom, and similar patterns of deposition have been recognised for other southern British hillforts and settlements. Such an interpretation could imply that Caburn's first rampart, was not about defence, but was more contrived to make the hill look important, separating off a sacred area. Certainly, this rampart does not conventionally defend the Caburn. Being situated down slope, it draws attention to the hill and in no way protects the interior from an outside attacker's view. From inside, the rampart circuit, even with a fence on top, would have been generally invisible to 'defenders', again due to its down slope location. By contrast the later, Saxon rampart unequivocally functioned defensively against the Vikings.



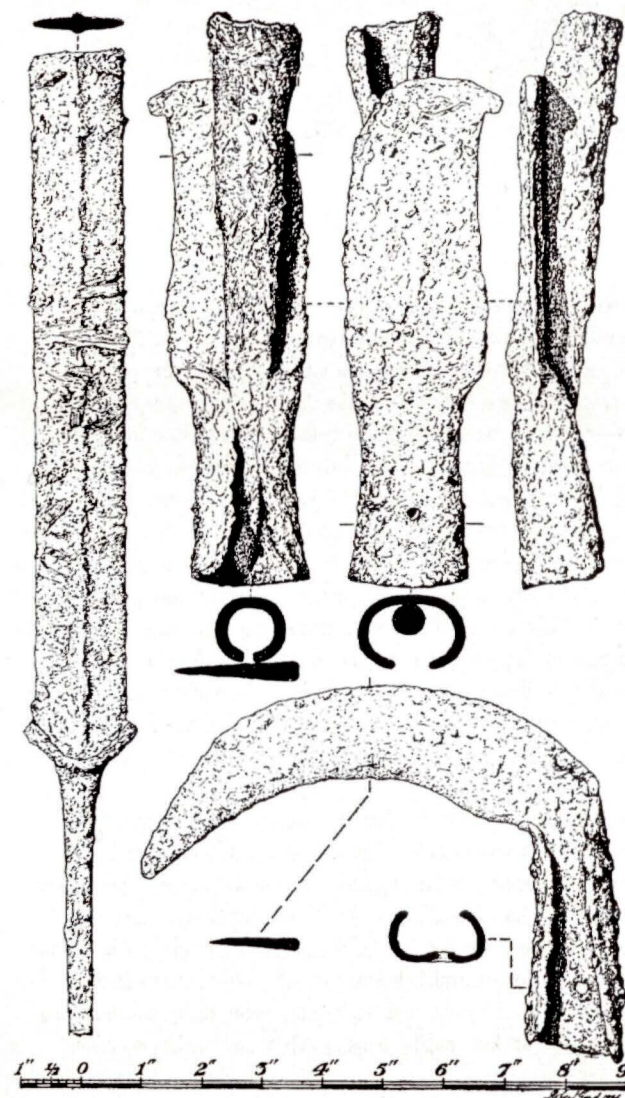
Placing offerings in
to a ceremonial pit

Interactions between people and wildlife

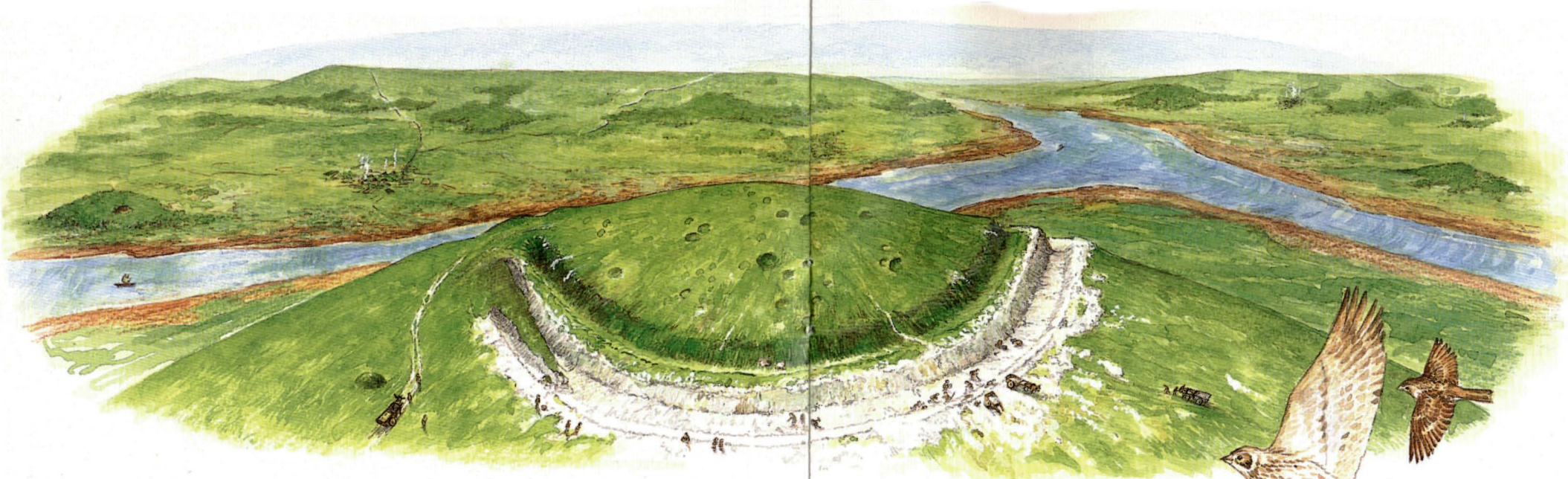
As the human population expanded and lifestyles altered, the effects on people and wildlife must also have changed. The increase in cultivation allowed people's diets to contain a greater quantity of cereals. As the density of permanent settlements increased, transmittable diseases may have become more of a problem. Claiming of land for settlement and the increasing population density may have led to a greater sense of territory and possible conflict between neighbouring groups. Pollen data from sediments in the Lewes Vale of the Brooks provide a picture of significant clearance of trees and the establishment of bracken and weeds of arable and pasture land from around 1200 BC. Wildflowers of disturbed soils such as wormwood, sterile brome, poppy, black medic, agrimony and smooth tare colonised the Iron Age fields, growing amongst barley and other crops.

Forest clearance also resulted in the establishment of shrub communities around the cleared areas and grasslands, containing plants such as gorse, wild roses, hawthorn, elder, blackthorn, hazel and bramble. The people would have exploited these for food or other purposes, such as timber for building and tool making and branches for wattle and firewood. Some herbs and fruits may have been of bartering value, such as flax, wild turnip, crab apple, wild plum and dwarf cherry.

Already, the Iron Age people were breeding species to 'improve' their value for food. Although mixed farming had developed, wild food was still exploited and the cultural understanding of wild resources (edible plants, animals, medicines) was becoming sophisticated. It is likely that large predators, such as wolves, were killed by the Iron Age people, where conflicts occurred. The wilderness of the South Downs continued to diminish as the people's degree of control over nature increased.



Finds from the Caburn
Middle Iron Age pits –
sword, billhook and
scythe. From *Sussex
Archaeological
Collections* 68 1927



Late Saxon period /
800 AD

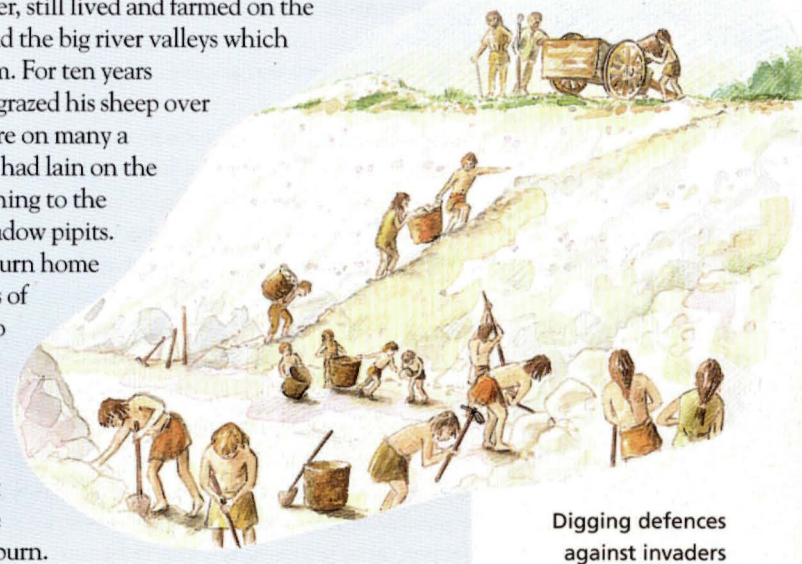
Setting the scene

More settlements have developed, such as Rodmell on the other side of the valley, dotted along the foot of the hills, probably utilising natural springs. Extensive cleared and cultivated areas are visible on the river plain and livestock are grazing the marshes. The Ouse – Cuckmere area is occupied predominantly by peasant farmers.

Aethelwulf was just fifteen. He put down his adze and scrambled up the loose chalk edge of the ditch. The new wide flat-bottomed ditch was a sun trap and the breeze on the bank above brought instant relief. The water cart arrived from the River Ouse below the Caburn, led by the one-armed Godwine, son of Goda. The break would be short, but long enough for another tale of Godwine's heroic exploits. The older men in the group had heard them all before although each time the tale of his lost arm became more heroic. The young boys, some as young as eight or nine, were enthralled. What was certain was that Godwine had been involved in an epic battle, routing the Viking encampment that had laid siege to Rochester. The Vikings were now regularly raiding along the south coast and King Alfred himself had ordered the fortification of Lewes, one of a series of burghs built to stop them. Lewes, a little trading port, was in the valley, so

Caburn was being strengthened to make a fortified lookout for the new burgh. It could even protect all the townsfolk if the threat became too great. Digging ditches was not Aethelwulf's usual job. His family owned sheep, cows and pigs. His father had driven the animals each year high into the Weald for summer pasture, but now his elder brother had a permanent farm up there. Most of his family and relatives, however, still lived and farmed on the South Downs and the big river valleys which cut through them. For ten years Aethelwulf had grazed his sheep over the Caburn where on many a summer's day he had lain on the springy turf listening to the skylarks and meadow pipits. Rarely did he return home without bunches of wild marjoram to help flavour the lamb stew. But for now, he had to return to digging the great ditch around the north side of Caburn.

Further excavation of the hill fort ditch. Corn buntings flying in foreground



Digging defences against invaders

Archaeologists remain uncertain as to the exact date of the great ditch around the north side of Caburn. Roman pottery has been found in and under the associated bank so the ditch must be Roman or later. The earlier period is unlikely, as they simply were not constructing these sorts of defences in southern England during the peace of Rome. A threat to the Saxon kingdom is much more likely, with the Vikings being a well-documented enemy.

In the 7th century a dispersed population lived in isolated farmsteads. The farms in the area were subsistence peasant family holdings (1 hide = land held by one free family) cultivatable by one plough team. Anglo Saxon Sussex held 7,000 hides.

The Caburn had probably returned to scrub after dense grazing in the Roman period. Then, the hill slopes all around Caburn were a patchwork of rectangular ploughed fields. Local farmers had become rich as they provided grain to the Roman navy at Pevensey. By the 11th century the population had expanded again with Lewes becoming a fortified burgh and port with minster church and mint. Once again the Caburn was heavily grazed and the hill slopes ploughed, although now in strips rather than Roman squares. Look north-west from Caburn today and you can see on nearby slopes the banks of lynchetts of both square Iron Age and Roman fields and strips of late Saxon or medieval date.

Interactions between people and wildlife

Most of the landscape was under human management by this period with true 'wilderness' surviving only as small fragments. Large estates were well established with a hierarchical human society ranging from lord to peasant. The threat of Viking invasion was constant and the increasingly large, permanent settlements were susceptible to disease outbreaks, such as the Justinian bubonic plague (c. 540 AD). With high birth rates and high death rates, disease and health were the most important determinants of the population. Food production, however, exceeded consumption and produce was marketed widely. The domestication of animals and plants continued to advance, as did the fertilising of soils with animal dung and vegetable matter. Large, oxen-drawn ploughs allowed the deeper, more fertile valley soils to be further cultivated.

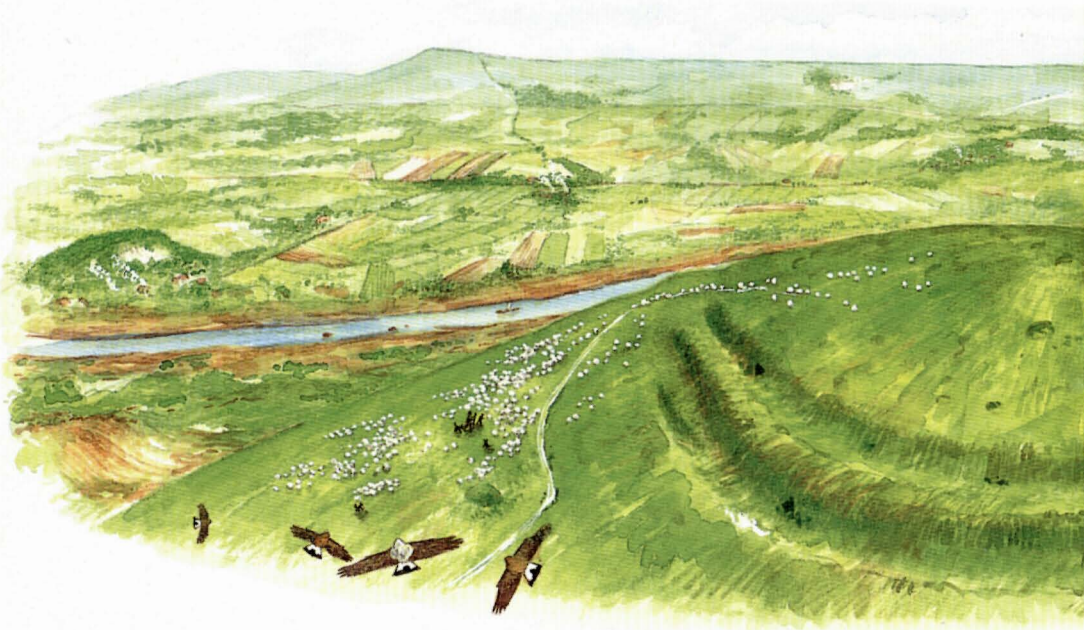
New species appear in the pollen data for this period, indicating an expanding downland flora and fauna. Wild mignonette, rest-harrow, common cat's ear, goat's beard, purging flax, birds-foot trefoil, salad burnet, devil's bit scabious and other flowers thrived in the turf, as sheep grazing became the predominant activity on the South Downs. This was the 'dawn' of the open, wildflower-rich chalk downlands, which were to become of great importance as sheep and, to a lesser extent cattle, pasture, through the Norman Conquest and the Middle Ages, right up to the 19th Century.

The Romano-Saxon influence on the wild plants and animals was also evident in other ways. Wild grasses such as chess, barren brome and wild oat established, having followed the cultivated crops such as cereals, peas and lentils northwards and westwards across Europe into the British Isles. Opium poppy also appeared, probably introduced with crops by the Romans. Herbs of economic importance, which are still present today in the wild, included alexanders, gout weed, belladonna and vervain. The Romans also introduced animals, which have since established in the Sussex downland, such as the Roman snail.

Wild foodstuffs typical of the Roman period included deer, hare and wild boar, various birds, fish and molluscs, raspberry and blackberry. Wild birds such as common partridge, woodpigeon and stock dove were commonly killed for the table while there is evidence that greylag goose and mallard were being domesticated.



Primitive breeds of
sheep and goat



Late 1700s

Setting the scene

Buzzards mewed overhead, young birds calling to their parents. Peter sat with his son Christian and his two faithful dogs tending a large flock of prize Southdown sheep. Peter was a contented man. His skills as a shepherd were valued by the Estate, as he produced healthy, fat lambs and ewes for wool and mutton, not to mention good fertiliser for the estate corn crop as he folded his flock every night down on the arable fields below. The far hills were also dotted with numerous sheep. Cattle grazed the lush green fields in the valley and labourers were busy weeding amongst the various crops. As a tenanted worker, Peter hoped that the Estate would reward his labours by protecting his family and ensuring that young Christian secured a home and a good living off the land. It was a time of prosperity for sheep and corn farmers on the South Downs, and hence of relative security for their shepherds.

The Southdown sheep

John Ellman developed the breed in the 1770s for meat and wool, while farming around the Caburn. He wanted the animals to be adapted to folding, wild enough to range the Downs during the day, but docile enough to confine using hazel



wattle hurdles during the night, to concentrate their dung and enrich areas to be subsequently planted with crops. Ellman's Southdown was hardy and produced wool of higher quality than any other breed of the day, rivalled only by the Spanish Merino. By the 1780s it was estimated that there were 200,000 Southdown ewes on the 33 mile downland stretch between Eastbourne and Steyning, a vast number compared to the present day.

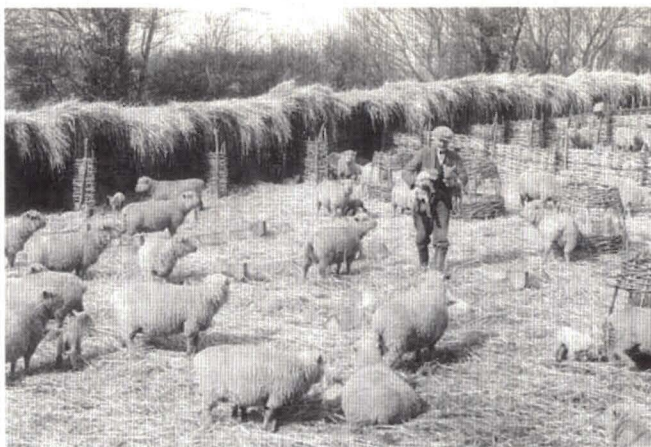
Sheep pasture dominates the hills, arable the valleys. Wheatears flying in foreground

In 1807, 20,000 Southdowns were sold at a fair on the Brighton Level and 30,000 of them were regularly gathered at the Lewes sheep fair in the same period. The breed became an important forerunner of other English Down breeds and famous for improving sheep breeds as far afield as New Zealand, Australia, the Argentine and the USA. In the early years of the 20th century, Southdown sheep were still winning prizes in the show ring and were numbered in many thousands. In 1987, they were registered as a rare breed when the number of breeding ewes throughout the country fell to fewer than 1,500. They remain on the rare breed register today.



Southdown sheep

Traditional lambing fold using hazel wattle hurdles, 1920s. Southdowns still an important breed. From Brandon 1998

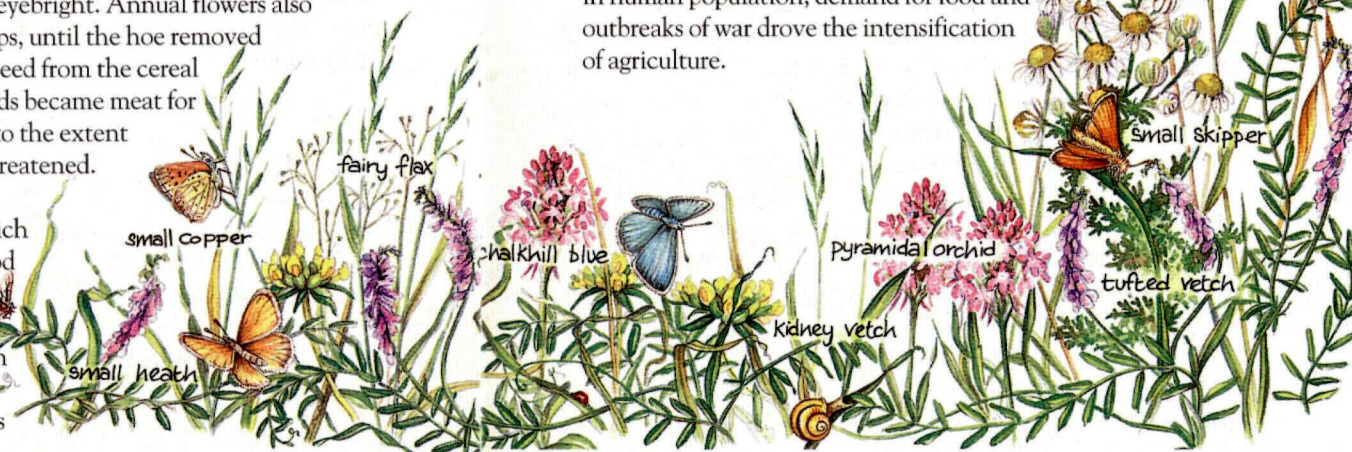


Interactions between people and wildlife

Faggots provided fuel and songbirds supper. Rabbits were established in the countryside and formed part of the diet of people, foxes and buzzards alike. The downland bird life was abundant, including nesting wheatear, stone curlew and many species of finch. Liming to catch birds for food or market was common practice. Large numbers were caught relatively easily, right up to the 1850s, as described in the writings of W H Hudson.

Although most of the landscape was under management for crops, grazing or harvesting of timber, wildlife still thrived alongside the rural people. In 1798, Edmund Scott wrote that the herbage of the Downs consisted principally of wild thyme, burnet, yarrow, trefoil and eyebright. Annual flowers also abounded amongst the crops, until the hoe removed them, and wild birds took seed from the cereal fields. In their turn, the birds became meat for the farmer's table, but not to the extent that their numbers were threatened.

The extent of wildflower-rich downland during this period was over thirty times that of the present. The fine turf on the slopes of the Caburn today, rich in wildflowers and insects, owes its origins



to the centuries of grazing that have gone before, without the influence of chemicals or fertilisers. The practice of folding of sheep on to crops actually had the opposite effect to applying fertiliser, as it effectively removed nutrients from the down and deposited them on the fields below. As a result, very specialised plants thrived in the conditions prevailing on the hill. These plants may be characterised generally by their ability to withstand 'having their tops bitten off' at regular intervals, coping with very limited supplies of nutrients from the poor downland soils and chronic shortages of water for their roots because the chalk is so free-draining. Most of these downland plants are therefore low-growing, small, stress-tolerant perennials, often very long-lived. Many of these species are, however, very slow to colonise new ground, so they are only found on grassland that has been consistently grazed for centuries. On ancient grasslands such as those covering the Caburn slopes, as many as 50 different species of plant can be found growing in one square metre. This diverse carpet of wildflowers, so well adapted to the grazed downland conditions is, however, very vulnerable to change. Increased nutrient levels from fertilisers can favour other, more vigorous plants that can out-compete the chalk specialists. If grazing is abandoned, the grassland can be invaded by shrubs, which can smother and shade out the wildflowers within a decade, destroying what has taken centuries to establish. If the wildflowers are lost, then so are the rare butterflies and other downland invertebrates dependant upon them. From the 18th to the 20th Century, the downland wildlife was to face increasingly severe changes as growth in human population, demand for food and outbreaks of war drove the intensification of agriculture.



World War II

Setting the scene

A group of Land Army women take a break for picnic lunch to enjoy the view, the breeze and the scent of downland flowers. Spitfires drone overhead. Mortar shell explosions are audible as a Canadian regiment trains on hills across the valley. Despite its green camouflage, the rattle of the midday train crossing the valley gives away its presence.

The old tractor strained as it struggled to pull the plough through the newly cultivated turf outside the Caburn. This was not the sound Frank was straining to hear. He was waiting to hear the low drone of aircraft coming in over the sea at Newhaven. Yesterday had been his eighteenth birthday and he still had one Woodbine left. Should he smoke it now or keep it for tomorrow? No, the position might be hit today and tomorrow might never come. He lit up. He sat outside, the camouflage netting roughly pulled over the three-sided position dug earlier in the year. It was 1940 and Frank was one of eight infantrymen stationed on the Caburn. He was much younger than the rest and feared he would soon be sent somewhere more dangerous. He would then lose contact with the group of teenage land girls stationed in the farms around Glynde.

During World War II Britain had to produce most of its own food. Old sheep pastures on the South Downs were ploughed up as part of the 'Dig for Victory' campaign. All the strong, young farm labourers were conscripted into the army so girls from towns and cities were sent to help on farms. Farming had to intensify and expand.

A landscape under
siege where food
production
is the priority

As you walk around the Caburn today you will see a series of World War II slit trenches dug into the earlier ditches and on the northern side, two three-sided Bren-gun positions. These were part of a rapidly established local 'stop-line' designed to meet the expected invasion of 1940. Fortunately, it never came.

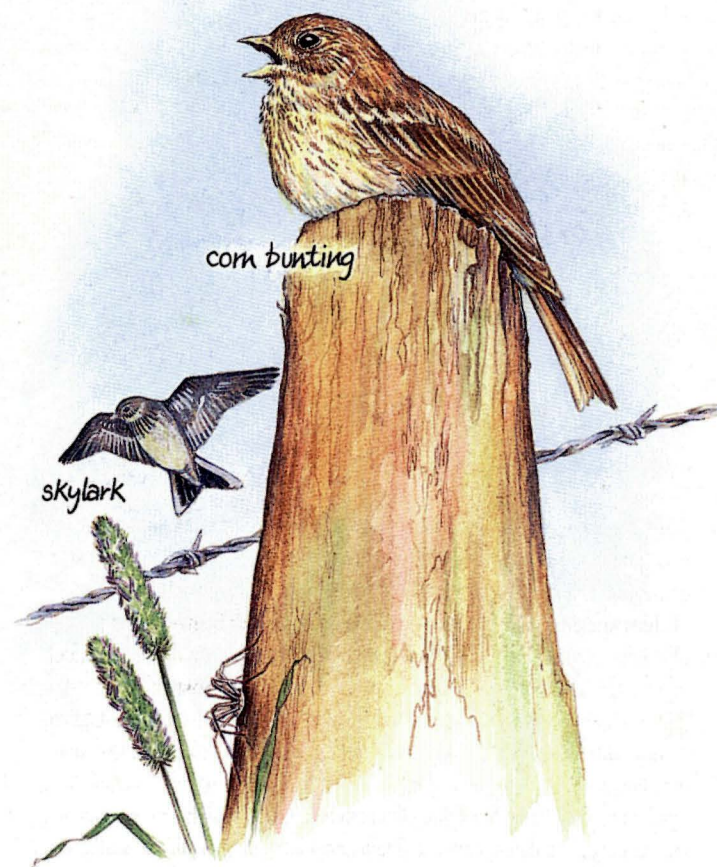


Land army women at
war time harvest.
From Brandon, 1998

The years between and after the two world wars saw unprecedented advances in our ability to exploit the land for food, as modern agriculture became so much more efficient. Unfortunately, our wildlife and the natural habitats of the countryside suffered as a consequence. As well as the wholesale destruction and fragmentation of downland, the development of modern fertilisers and other chemicals disrupted the natural balance of ecosystems on a massive scale. Pesticides which persisted in the wild, including DDT and dieldrin, were used widely to control crop pests in the 1950s and 1960s, causing the deaths of millions of wild birds and other animals, particularly those at the top of the food chain, such as birds of prey. Legislation was passed to restrict the use of such chemicals and the wild populations gradually recovered. In recent years however, evidence has emerged that wild birds are suffering, not from pesticide poisoning, but from reduced food availability due to the efficiency with which modern pesticides and other intensive farming methods have depleted the amount of food (invertebrates, marginal habitats, spilt seed etc.) in the landscape.

Public awareness of such problems has, however, increased over this period. The rapid development of rural recreational pursuits since the war years, with thousands of people, particularly from the burgeoning urban population, seeking out leisure breaks, exemplified by the early rambling and cycling clubs, meant that the countryside became increasingly important as a recreational resource as well as a source of food. The South Downs was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1966, reflecting the value put on such landscapes by society. The tourism industry is now an extremely important part of our rural economy. Many farms, for example, have diversified from food production into provision of facilities for short holiday breaks and leisure pursuits such as horse riding.

During the same period, particularly from the 1940s onwards, organised nature conservation became an increasingly powerful force in popular culture, as groups of naturalists continued to form the many organisations we now see trying to protect our wildlife for people to enjoy. Today, the philosophy of conserving nature runs right



through our society, from local community groups, schools and colleges, to national and international organisations and legislation.

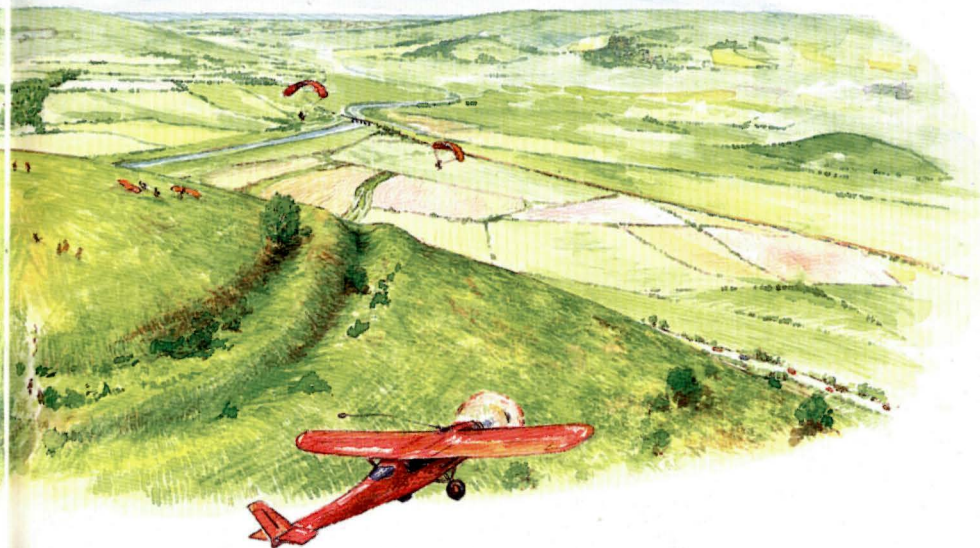
Our culture has developed from many centuries of exploiting natural resources to feed and clothe ourselves, through the ultimate 'taming' of the countryside as a food factory, to the current situation in which part of our culture is trying to save what fragments of 'wilderness' remain, while moderating the way in which we exploit the rest, to reduce pollution and enhance the quality of the living environment.



Present day

Setting the scene

Mike launched his radio-controlled model plane out over the hill, carefully avoiding the paragliders. He had managed half an hour's flying, when a party of schoolchildren reached the end of their climb to the top of the Caburn and collapsed nearby in a noisy heap on the grass. Mike was happy to show his model to the group and, while chatting to the teachers and nature reserve warden, he decided to join their guided walk. Whether flying his planes or just walking, Mike loved the fresh air, the bracing winds and the familiar views of the South Downs landscape. As he listened to the warden's story of the history of the Caburn, its people and its wildlife, over the distant sound of traffic from the A27 and the faint roar of a 747 on its flight path for Gatwick, the songs of skylarks, a corn bunting and the rasping calls of grasshoppers could still be heard. Mike's excursions to the Downs would never be the same again. The snippets of information gained from the guided walk had roused his curiosity about this ancient landscape, making him hungry to learn more. No longer would he simply be walking on grass on the Caburn. He now knew just how rich in wildflowers the Caburn turf was, with up to 50 different types of plant within one pace of where he stood on the hill slope. After everyone had left the hill, the deepening gloom of the dusk was punctuated by the green lights of glow worms, as it had been for 5,000 midsummer nights before.



Interactions between people and wildlife

The Caburn remains in a farmed landscape today, with sheep and cattle grazing the flower-rich turf. The South Downs was designated an 'Environmentally Sensitive Area' in 1987. This designation is part of our modern agricultural policy and provides resources for farmers to manage the land in an environmentally sensitive way. Amongst other measures, reducing inputs of fertilisers and chemicals as well as lowering the intensity of grazing has meant that wild plants and animals have benefited significantly from the scheme.

The management of the Caburn and its important features is dependant upon partnership and co-operation. English Nature cares for the wildlife of the National Nature Reserve and English Heritage protects the hill fort as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM). Both liaise with the landowners, the Glynde Estate. Other partners include the Sussex Downs Conservation Board (SDCB) and the Sussex Archaeological Society. Local farmers assist in managing the site, as do local volunteer groups from, for example, the SDCB and the local group of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV). From time to time, groups of volunteers on foreign exchange also help out, as we develop partnerships with nature conservation bodies in France and even further afield.

An intensively managed landscape.
Model aeroplane flying in foreground

In reflecting on the people and wildlife of a site as ancient as this, one cannot help but wonder what lies in the future. Who cares about the Caburn today? The owners and managers obviously have deep involvement in its management and responsibility to care for it. Visitors using the site for recreation, value its wildness and scenic beauty. The paragliders use the hill's updraft to launch their high-tech chutes. Wildlife enthusiasts consider its intrinsic richness in plants and animals (particularly the rarer species) important. Archaeologists believe that its historic value is also fundamentally important. But what does the Caburn mean to the many people who have no direct interest in any of these things, or who are yet to discover any such interests in the hurly-burly of modern life?

Perhaps the most important thing about the Caburn in this sense, is its potential to illustrate, as many of these ancient fragments of landscape do, that we have always been part of – and will continue to benefit from – the living landscape, so long as we care for it. What will be conserved or destroyed in the future depends upon what choices we, as individuals in modern society, make about how we live our lives into the 21st century and beyond.

Sources of further information:

English Heritage
Eastgate Court,
195–205, High Street,
Guildford
GU1 3EH
www.english-heritage.org.uk

English Nature
The Site Manager,
East Sussex National
Nature Reserves,
Lewes Office,
Phoenix House,
32–33 North Street,
Lewes,
East Sussex
BN7 2PH
www.english-nature.org.uk

Sussex Archaeological Society
The Research Officer,
Barbican House,
169 High Street,
Lewes,
East Sussex
BN7 1YE
www.sussexpast.co.uk

Sussex Downs Conservation Board
Seven Sisters Country
Park,
Exceat,
Seaford,
East Sussex
BN25 4AD
www.vic.org.uk

References and recommended further reading:

Peter Brandon, 1998, *The South Downs*. Phillimore.

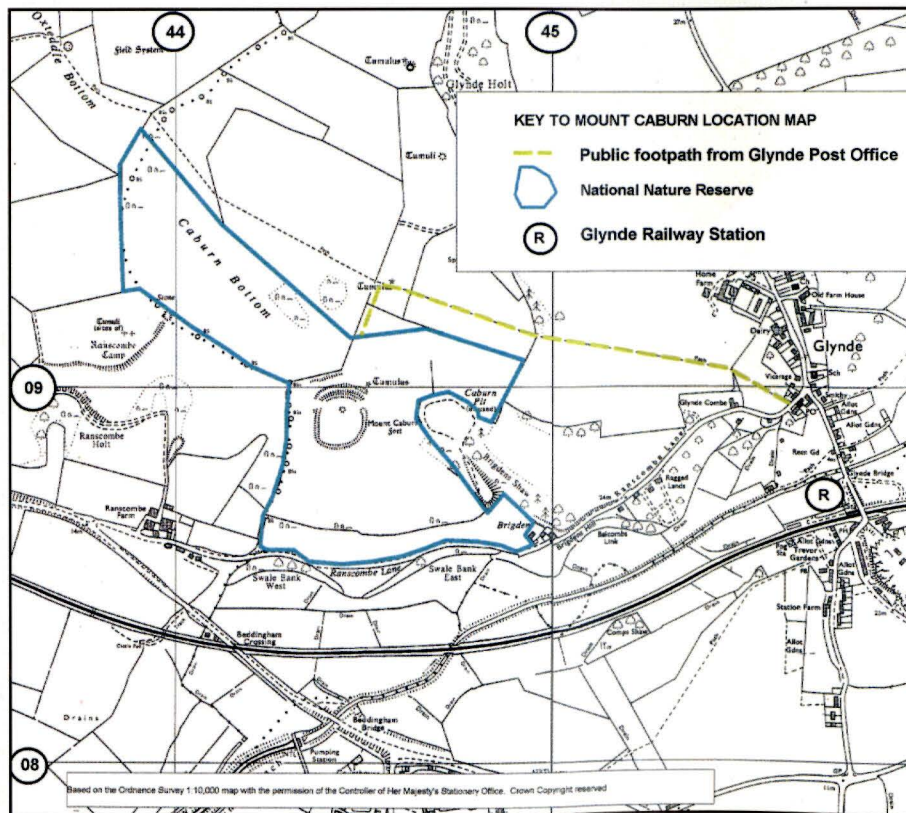
Peter Drewett and Sue Hamilton, 1999. 'Marking Time and Space' - Excavations and landscape studies at the Caburn Hillfort, East Sussex, 1996–98. Sussex Archaeological Collections 137, 7–37.

English Nature, (Sussex and Surrey Team) 1997. *South Downs Natural Area Profile*.

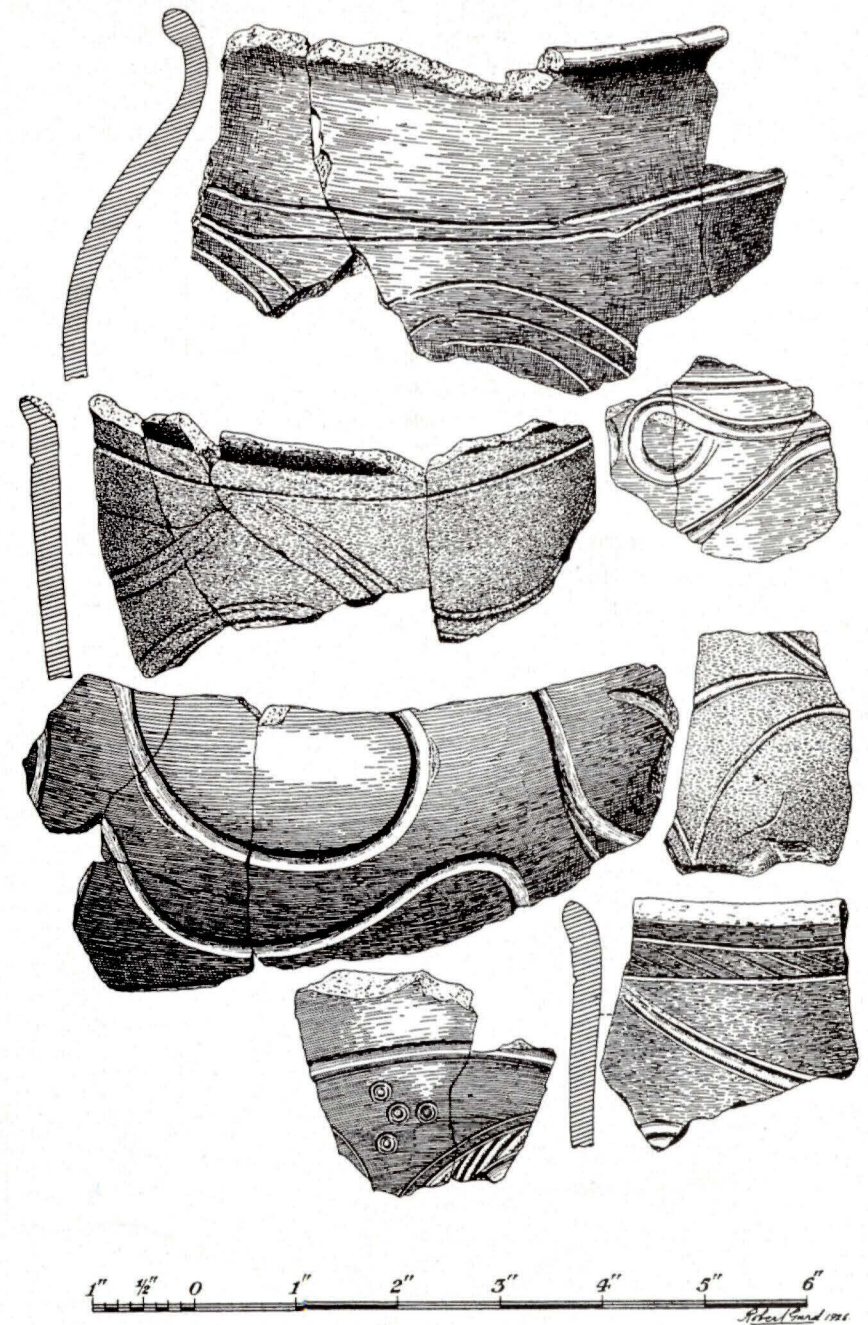
Kim Leslie and Brian Short, 1999. *An Historical Atlas of Sussex*. Phillimore.

Sussex Biodiversity Partnership, 2000. *Habitat Action Plan for Sussex – Chalk Grassland*.

The Caburn today is legally protected, but this has only come about in recent times. Lewes Downs was first designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1953, [with amendments in 1986, a legal protection derived from the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981]. Mount Caburn National Nature Reserve was established in the mid 1980s. More recently still, the Lewes Downs SSSI has been recognised in European legislation and designated a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) under the UK Habitats Regulations. All these measures help to ensure the protection of these sites, so that their plants and wild creatures will continue to thrive to the benefit of generations to come. The commitment of Government resources, through English Nature and its partner organisations, will also ensure that the land is managed in a sustainable way.



Location map



Middle Iron Age Pottery from the Caburn. From *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 68 1927



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Further information is available from the Site Manager, East Sussex National Nature Reserves, at the address above, or on the English Nature website : www.english-nature.org.uk

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Front cover main picture:
The Caburn in 1993 from the South East
Malcolm Emery (English Nature)

Inset top:
1997 excavation of the hill fort by
University College London and Sussex
Archaeological Society
Malcolm Emery (English Nature)

Inset bottom:
Ungrazed chalk wildflowers 1991
Peter Wakely (English Nature)



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